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ABSTRACT

This 9-month naturalistic study investigated maternal influence on the responses of 1 1/2- to 2-year-old infants to emotional distress events occurring in the family environment. Mothers were trained to report details of distress incidents, of the child's reactions to the person in distress, and of the mother's own response to the child and to the victim. The mothers of 16 infants were instructed to tape record (in narrative style) an account of events in which their child was the cause of someone's physical or psychological distress, and those in which the child was a bystander. Every third week an investigator visited the home to supervise the mother's data collection, to simulate an emotion and to assess mother-child interactions. Analysis of maternal techniques indicated that mothers were not very active when their children were bystanders to distress. The little teaching they did do seemed not to influence children's altruism. However, mothers' disciplinary techniques regarding distress caused by their children emerged as a salient element in the child's moral learning: (1) mothers' high use of affective explanations when the child transgressed was significantly linked with more reparation from their children, while neutrally delivered explanations were unrelated to children's reparation; (2) the more altruistic children in innocent bystander situations were those whose mothers used affective explanations in handling their child in transgression situations; and (3) the frequent use of unexplained prohibitions as a disciplinary technique tended to deter learning of altruistic responses. (Author/SS)

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Child Rearing and the Development of Children's Altruism

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Child Rearing and the Development of Children's Altruism

This is a study of child rearing practices in relation to children's prosocial interventions with victims of distress. The children are 1½ to 2½ years old, an age at which acts of sympathy and sharing are first manifested. This, therefore, may be a developmental period in which rearing experiences have a particularly potent influence.

Young children are frequently exposed to others' expressions of distress as bystanders and as causes. Research on rearing conditions associated with children's responses of aiding and comforting in these two kinds of distress circumstances has generally proceeded along two different conceptual paths. Aiding and comforting in situations when children are bystanders has traditionally been considered in the framework of altruism. Aiding or comforting when children have been responsible for someone's distress has been conceptualized as reparation for transgression and as conscience.

Our purpose was to examine the common or different rearing conditions associated with children's altruism and with children's reparations. It seemed particularly appropriate here to study altruism and reparation together, since distinctions of cause and circumstance may not be so clear to very young children. When aroused by someone's emotional experience, they may not be certain as to whether it is their own, or another person's experience, and whether they or someone else has caused the harm. Mothers' actions in these kinds of circumstances may affect how children learn to differentiate emotions and, also, how they behave toward distressed others.

The literature on moral development is suggestive of both common and different rearing conditions as antecedents of conscience and altruism. Nurturance, love withdrawal, modeling, reasoning and physical punishment are some of the variables investigated. We studied these and other maternal

practices in relation to children's reparation and altruism. Of special theoretical interest was the mother's handling of children's transgressions against persons (a presumed locus of conscience development) as a predictor of children's altruism.

Seven boys and nine girls 1½ to 2 years old, from white, middle class families were studied for a nine month period of time. Naturalistic procedures were developed which provided accounts of emotional distress events occurring in the family environment. Mothers were carefully trained in techniques of observing and immediate, detailed reporting.

Mothers reported incidents in which someone in the child's presence expressed distress (e.g., fear, sorrow, or pain). They tape recorded each incident in narrative style, including a description of the emotional expression, who was expressing it, what preceded or caused the emotion, the child's reactions to the person in distress, and the mother's response to the child and to the victim. Events reported were those in which the child was the cause of someone's physical or psychological distress and those for which the child was a bystander. Mothers were asked to try to report every relevant incident. They were instructed also to simulate specified emotions, one per week. Every third week an investigator visited the home to supervise mother's data collection, to simulate an emotion and to assess mother-child interaction. Observer reliabilities for simulated incidents and coder reliabilities for mothers' observations were per cent agreements in the 70's and 80's.

To summarize, mothers' caretaker techniques were assessed in mothers' reports of their own behaviors when their children had caused distress and when their children were bystanders to another's distress, and in investigators' ratings of mother-child interaction in home visits. Children's prosocial

responses toward distressed others--i.e. verbal sympathy, physical comfort, help, sharing, protection, etc., were categorized separately as reparative or altruistic depending upon whether the prosocial response followed a transgression or a witnessed distress.

Mothers' techniques in child-caused and child-witnessed distresses are presented in Table 1. Scores are the average percent of incidents in which each technique was used. Mothers provide much explicit teaching, primarily in situations of child-caused distress. Their major emphasis (in 40% of incidents) is on explaining to the child the painful consequences of his hurtful actions for others. In many of these explanations there are overtones of moralizing, prohibiting, and judging. Mothers also suggest positive actions to the child, give unexplained verbal prohibitions, use physical restraint and physical punishment, and very occasionally model altruism to the child's victim or provide reassurance to their own child. In contrast, there is far less teaching when children are innocent bystanders to another's distress experience. Mothers offer few explanations, and the explanations they do give are more neutrally delivered. Sometimes mothers model altruism. Their predominent response in bystander events is to offer their own child reassurance that there is no real cause for concern.

Our major research interest is in these caretaker techniques as they influence children's reparative and altruistic interventions. As we have just seen, mothers were not very active when their children were bystanders to distress. The little teaching they did do seemed not to influence children's altruism and reparation. However, mothers' disciplinary techniques regarding distress caused by their children emerged as a salient element of the child's moral learning. Mothers were dichotomized as high or low on the frequency of use of each disciplinary technique shown in Table 2 and the average reparation scores of the children of the two subgroups of mothers were compared.

Mothers' high use of affective explanations when the child transgressed was significantly linked with more reparation from children. Affective explanations are those embellished with emotion, values, and with high expectations regarding the child's self-control (examples; "That makes me very sad to see you hit someone." "You must never hurt anyone." "Stop! you are hurting me." "I don't like to be with you when you act like that.") Mothers' more neutrally delivered explanations were unrelated to children's reparation. Thus, the effective explanations are not calmly, reasoned verbal statements, carefully designed to enlighten the child: they are emotionally imposed, sometimes harshly and often forcefully. One might say here that mothers' effective inductive techniques are also power assertive psychological techniques.

We have been discussing mothers' disciplinary techniques when children cause distress to someone, and how these affect children's reparations for transgressions. Do these same maternal techniques used for handling distresses caused by children relate to what the child does altruistically in different circumstances when s/he is simply an innocent bystander to another person's distress? These comparisons are also in Table 2. The more altruistic children were those whose mothers frequently used affectively-arousing explanations in handling the child's transgressions. Again, the more neutrally toned messages were not effective. This pattern of associations between maternal behaviors controlling children's transgressions and children's altruism as well as reparation is suggestive of a kinship between the children's early acts of altruism and some forms of early conscience. One other disciplinary technique was associated both with children's reparations for transgression and with altruism. The frequent use of unexplained prohibitions served as a deterrent to learning. One might speculate that frequent "no's", "stops," and "don'ts" in the absence of clarifying information

lead to the learning of a genralized inhibition, i.e., learning to stand back in the face of all kinds of distress.

Three important and interrelated findings stand out: (1) the transfer of the child's prosocial learning from interactions with the mother when the child is transgressing, to other distress situations, (2) the mothers' use of explanations or verbal induction as a possible element affecting the transfer, and (3) the highly complex nature of this inductive process. Here, the differential effectiveness of emotional and neutral verbal inductions indicates the need in future research to distinguish the several forms of behavior that have customarily been grouped together in research and theory as psychological, verbal, inductive techniques.

The mother's empathic caregiving or nurturance in relation to the child's own distress was rated by observers during home visits. This is another dimension of rearing that relates significantly to children's reparative and altruistic responses. It is, then, the nurturant and moralizing parent who arouses the child to concerned action. This combination of conditions may be important for the effectiveness of induction and power. One might go so far as to conjecture that children's generalized altruism has as characteristic components both empathy and guilt or a feeling of social responsibility concerning the distress of others. What is needed now is to begin to identify further these affective elements of altruism and to examine the core of this responsibility in relation to the differing socialization experiences of children.

Percent of Occasions on Which Maternal Techniques Were Used in Child-Caused and Witnessed Distresses

Table 1

	Child-Caused Distresses (N=14)[a]		Distresses Observed by Child (N-16)		"t"[c]
	Mean[b]	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Total Explanations	40	(25)	12	(08)	4.72**
Neutral explanations	18	(13)	11	(08)	1.83
Affective explanations					
Moralizing	20	(14)	01	(02)	5.14**
Verbal prohibition	22	(18)			
Statements of principles	06	(07)			
Withdrawal of love	05	(05)			
Suggestion of positive action	13	(10)	01	(01)	4.69**
Unexplained verbal prohibition	15	(12)			
Physical restraint	13	(10)			
Physical punishment	09	(10)			
Modeling altruism to victim	07	(10)	21	(22)	-2.63*
Reassurance, support of child	08	(11)	36	(29)	-3.51*
No caregiver reaction	31	(23)	56	(18)	-3.84*

a. Two children were not reported to have caused physical distress. t test comparing maternal techniques in distresses caused and witnessed by children were based on the paired scores of 14 children. The average numbers of child-caused and child-witnesse distresses were 14.8 and 31.3 respectively.

b. Scores represent the average of the percent of occasions on which the mother used e technique.

Table 2.

Mothers' High and Low in Given Rearing Techniques in Child-Caused Distress Incidents in Relation to Children's Reparations and Altruism

Mothers' Responding		Child's Reparation Behavior		Child's Bystander Altruism	
		% of episodes	"t"	% of episodes	"t"
Neutral explanations	High use	38	1.38[a]	38	<1[a]
	Low use	24		32	
Affective explanations (moralizing love withdrawal, absolutes)	High use	45	4.77***[a]	43	2.60*[a]
	Low use	14		22	
Unexplained prohibitions	High use	19	-3.37**	25	-2.41*[a]
	Low use	41		43	
Physical punishment and restraint	High use	27	<1[a]	30	-1.23*[a]
	Low use	37		42	
No caregiver reaction	High use	29	<1[a]	30	<1[a]
	Low use	34		41	

Note: "a" indicates replication of relation in time lag analyses
*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001